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## SOUTHERN AGRICULTURE AND THE NEGRO FARMER.\*

BY H. B. FRISSELL, L.L.D., *Hampton Institute.*

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Doctor Coulter deserves the appreciation of those who are interested in the rural conditions in the South for the valuable historical statement of the changes which have taken place in the method of farming in the South. We have in his tables and in his discussion a statistical measure of changes which have been known to us in a general way for a long time. We have realized that the large farms, particularly those that had the plantation form, were gradually being divided into smaller tracts. Of course the extent of this subdivision into small farms is somewhat influenced as Doctor Coulter indicates by the changing definitions of the farm from census to census, and particularly the change which took place between 1890 and 1900. The census enumerators, up to 1900, had the following phrase before them as a part of the farm definition: "A farm is what is owned or leased by one man and cultivated under his care." There were other elements in this definition, however, which tended to make it more in harmony with the present one, but the incorporation of the sentence just quoted with the general idea of the "farm" prevailing in the South tended to lay more stress upon the large plantation areas and less stress upon the component tenant groups. In 1900, the census definition of the farm made it quite clear that any area greater than three acres under the direction of one man was to be regarded as a farm, regardless of the fact that it was a part of a plantation, where there was more or less central management. This emphasis upon the tenant unit, as Doctor Coulter states, led to an unfortunate omission of the activities of the plantation owner who lived upon his plantation or who exercised considerable supervision over the tenants cultivating his land. The 1910 census is to be commended for its effort to give proper recognition to the ability and to the energy of the many plantation

\* Discussion of Doctor Coulter's paper on "The Rural South," Washington, D. C., December 28, 1911.

owners who are yet making large contributions to the success of Southern agriculture. It is to be hoped that future censuses will follow the lead of the present effort, so that every plantation owner, who increases the efficiency of his tenants, through his supervision, will be properly recorded in the census returns.

This recognition of the contribution of the plantation owner and manager to Southern agriculture is not to be interpreted as a denial of the status of *farmer* to the plantation tenant. There seems to be a tendency in this direction in certain quarters. I am not sure but that Doctor Coulter's stress upon the fact that the tenant system is a substitute for the wage system in the North is an indication that he inclines to believe this. I refer to such a statement as the following: "Change was made to a system under which each laboring family instead of being hired at a definite wage was assigned to a piece of land and given part of the crop as compensation for his labor."

While it is unfair to deny recognition of the contribution made by the plantation owner and manager, it would be equally unfair to put all Negro tenants into one large class and to regard them as practically a modified form of the wage system. Doctor Coulter does not make clear his position on this point. He neither affirms nor denies that the plantation tenant is practically the same as the wage hand. My own study of the tenant system in the South leads me to believe that it is very important for us to recognize the varying classes of tenants. In general they can be divided into the two large groups of *share croppers* and *renters*. The share cropper, as he is usually known in the South, is only one stage removed from the wage hand. The renter, on the other hand, is considerably above the wage hand and approximates the economic status of the tenant farmer as he is known in other parts of the country. In order to understand the economic status of the Negro tenant, it is necessary for us to have a clearer recognition of these two classes of tenants. The total number of Negro farmers in the Southern States for 1910 is 890,141, of these 285,950, or 32 per cent., were cash tenants and 384,524 were share tenants. The cash tenants form 32 per cent. of all the Negro farmers. The cash tenants plus the owners

form 56.6 per cent. of all Negro farmers, leaving 43.2 per cent. as the proportion of share tenants. We are not to infer from this, however, that 43 per cent. of the Negro tenants were share croppers. Unfortunately the census tenure terminology has not made it possible to distinguish the two classes of share tenants, namely, those who share one third and one fourth and those who share one half. In the South the share tenant who gives less than one half of his crops for the use of the land is quite apt to supply his own mule and implements and therefore to be grouped with the renter; in other words, using the census terminology, with the cash tenants, even though we regard the cash tenants as the only independent renters, we have at least one third of all the Negro farmers of the South who belong to the independent renter type. If we could determine the proportion of the 384,000 share tenants who pay less than one half of their crops for their farms, the number of independent renters could be very much increased. Considering the remaining share cropper, for the moment, it should be borne in mind that even this class has moved forward from the condition of the wage hand. Unfortunately the census has not yet published the 1910 statistics which show the status of these varying classes of tenants as regards possession of animals and implements. I can therefore indicate to you the status of these farming types only by taking typical examples. A very interesting study bearing on this subject has been made by a reliable student\* in Macon County, Alabama.

The following extracts describe the various grades of these farm workers:

*Share-hand.* J. T. Walker of the Marshall Farm community in Macon County, who, while working as a monthly-wage hand wished to test his ability in operating a small farm. He secured a plot of ground from his employer, which he worked at odd times while keeping up his regular work as a monthly-wage hand. He made a very good cotton and corn crop on his small farm. His experiment was so successful that he gained confidence in himself, and the following year, contracted to work on halves, or as a share-cropper.

The cropper who works under a plantation system with thirty or forty other families is subjected to the system in,

\*T. J. Edwards of Tuskegee Institute, in *Southern Workman* for August, September, and October, 1911

vogue upon that plantation. The landlord employs a rider whose duty it is to supervise all work on the plantation. The rider dictates the number of acres to be planted in certain crops, the amount of fertilizer to be used, and when and where to plant. The cropper rises at four in the morning at the beating of a piece of steel which serves as a bell, and works until midday. If his wife goes to the field she leaves about eleven o'clock to prepare dinner. On very hot days two hours are taken for dinner and rest. No work is done on Saturday afternoons. Crops are harvested and divided by the cropper, who sells his share to the landlord after deductions are made for expenses. This type of cropper is found in south Macon County.

The cropper who farms apart from a plantation is of course free from plantation supervision. He is more aggressive and trustworthy than the cropper described above, and is left largely in charge of his own farming affairs. He may have been a renter and because of some misfortune or inconvenience prefers workings "on halves" until he is sufficiently prosperous to rent again. If he owns a mule the landlord rents the mule and the cropper works him. If the cropper has feed the landlord pays for what the mule consumes. Crops are divided in the usual way.

The cropper who after two or three years is prosperous enough to buy or partly buy a mule, has farming implements, feed for this stock, a wagon and buggy, a cow, and a few hogs and chickens, is in a position to join the renting class.

*Renter.* Anderson Chiles of Dollington Community, after working on shares two years, started renting by buying a mule at \$135, paying \$35 down, the remaining \$100 to be paid in 12 months at 15 per cent interest. He also had 1 milch cow, 4 hogs, 35 gallons of syrups, 700 bundles of fodder, 50 bushels of cotton seed, 75 bushels of sweet potatoes, 2,000 stalks of seed cane, and \$15 in cash.

The following is the history of Harrison White, a renter of Tysonville, Macon County, Alabama, and his ten years' struggle to get money to start buying land. In 1901 he farmed with one plow, paid himself out of debt, and cleared \$200; in 1902 he continued farming with one plow and came out \$175 behind; in 1903 he came out \$388 behind; in 1904 he ran one plow, made 13½ bales of cotton, paid up back debts, and made 250 bushels of corn; in 1905, to make a crop, he bought an ox to supplement his overworked horse. He paid his debts and cleared \$380. He paid \$35 for a wagon, \$60 for a buggy, \$55 for a sewing machine, and \$45 for furniture; in 1906 he bought a mule on time for \$225, and came out \$190 behind; in 1907 he paid off \$190 with interest, bought another mule,

and saved \$200; in 1908 he saved 3 bales of cotton and much corn; in 1909 he paid out and cleared one bale of cotton; and in 1910 he paid all debts and banked \$300 to invest in buying land.

*Landowner.* The landowners of Macon County are active workers in the interest of the public schools of their communities. Two gave an acre of land each, upon which schoolhouses were built. Three sold property for school purposes at half price. The landowners usually order material and make contracts in case schoolhouses are to be built. They furthermore give much free labor, such as hauling lumber and working upon school buildings. They usually board the teachers and care for the preachers who come into their communities.

In the farmers' organizations the landowners are usually leaders. The landowning preacher, teacher, and church officer are more honored by their followers than those who own no land. Delegates from Macon County local organizations to the Tuskegee Annual Negro Conference are mostly landowners. In towns where they buy goods the inducements to get their trade are abundant.

No people treasure their property more highly than the landowning colored people, and the inclination to dispose of it is exceedingly small. On the contrary, the inclination to become larger landholders is very much greater than the disposition to sell or mortgage property.

The conclusions stated in Mr. Edwards' articles are substantiated by the 1900 census returns as far as the terms "cash" and "share tenants" distinguish these classes. I am quite sure from some preliminary figures that have been worked out for the 1910 census that we shall find the owners at the head in value of house, in value of animals, and in the number of years on one farm. The class next in rank to the owner is the cash tenant, together with the share one third and one fourth which form the total group of independent renters. The tenant who is lowest in rank as regards these possessions is the share-one-half or share-cropper type. The point, then, which I desire to emphasize in connection with Doctor Coulter's statement that the tenant system in the South is a substitute for the hired labor system in the North, is that the tenant classes are not to be regarded as having the same economic status as the hired labor in the North. While it is true that the share-cropper group is only slightly removed from the

wage hand, there is considerable difference between the wage hand and the independent renter. In this connection I desire to emphasize also the fact that the large movement of the Negro wage hand into the share-cropper class is one of the very striking evidences of the progress of the Negro race. To be sure, we must grant that the definition of the farm did help to swell the increase of Negro farmers from 1890 to 1900. Such influence has but very little to do, however, with the increase of farmers from 1900 to 1910. The increase of Negro farmers from 1900 to 1910 in my opinion is an indication of the forward movement of the Negro wage hand into the farmer class. You will remember that the increase of the Negro farmers in the states considered by Doctor Coulter is 22 per cent. as against 13 per cent. for the whites. Whether this movement makes for better cultivation of the soil or not, the fact remains that the Southern white farmer has been willing to give the Negro increasing independence in his farm activities.

One other point of minor importance is Doctor Coulter's reference to the increase of Negro owners in comparison with white owners. Doctor Coulter says, "On the other hand the increase in number of owners was 93,826 and of these 70,004, or 74.6 per cent., were white and *only* 23,822, or 25.4 per cent., were Negroes." I desire to emphasize the fact that in order to get a more accurate measure of the progress which the Negroes have made in ownership, Doctor Coulter should have added that the percentage in increase for the Negroes was 18 per cent. as against 9.4 per cent. for the whites. It is desirable in measuring the progress of any people that they be compared with their own previous condition as well as with the status of another group.